



**Autism Spectrum Disorder: An Overview**  
**Four-Part Professional Development**  
*Moderated by Stacey DeWitt*  
*Co-Founder and President, Connect with Kids Education Network*

**Module Three**  
**Eligibility Requirements, Classroom Management and Accommodations**

We are back, with a much more technical segment as we explore information on eligibility requirements, developing goals for your students with ASD, and classroom management and accommodations. So, get ready for some definitions and details.

In this section we will be discussing the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act** (or IDEA) and the **504 Plan** – both involve legislation focused on making sure that individuals with disabilities have the same rights and protections as those who do not have disabilities.

First – the IDEA. As you may already know, the **IDEA** provides for a “free appropriate public education” for all children with disabilities. Each child is entitled to an education that is tailored to his special needs and a placement that will allow him to make reasonable educational progress, at no cost to his family.

The IDEA, enacted in 1975, mandates a public education for all eligible children and the school’s responsibility for providing the supports and services that will allow this to happen. IDEA was most recently revised in 2004 and, in fact, renamed the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act**, but most people still refer to it as IDEA.

The law mandates that the state provide an eligible child with a free appropriate public education that meets his or her unique individual needs. IDEA specifies that children with various disabilities, including autism, be entitled to early intervention services and special education. It establishes an important team approach and a role for parents as equal partners in the planning for an individual child, and requires an education in the least restrictive environment.

In addition to the IDEA, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) sets forth, as a *civil right*, protections and provisions for equal access to education for anyone with a disability.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is another civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs and activities, public and private that receive federal financial assistance. Generally, the individuals protected by these laws include anyone with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more life activities.

We should also be aware of **LRE – least restrictive environment** requirements. School districts are required to educate students with disabilities in regular classrooms with non-

disabled peers to the maximum extent possible – often called mainstreaming or inclusion. That does not mean that every student has to be in a general education classroom, but that the objective is to place students in as natural a learning environment as possible.

Next, let's define **IEP: The Individualized Education Plan**. **The IEP is a plan or program developed to ensure that a child who has a disability identified under the law and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives specialized instruction and related services.**

*“The IEP is formulated by a team for each child and that includes the parents, obviously the classroom teacher, there needs to be a general education teacher of that student's grade level to be there, school administration and any therapists that will be working with the student (school psychologists, speech psychologists, occupational psychologists, physical therapists) – whatever ones are being provided by the school system. It is set up to be a collaborative process where the school system can identify the needs and make suggestions and the parents can come in with their suggestions for what areas of weakness should we be addressing, what goals and objectives should we be working on for this school year. So it's set up for each school year, what they will work on that year and what attainable goals we can set.”*

Dana T. Zavatkay, Ph.D.

Program Manager, School Consultation Program

Marcus Autism Center, Atlanta

Again, experts and parents agree the key word is individualized, along with a healthy dose of collaboration, trust and teamwork.

*“We made sure that we were always available you know we shared what was going on in Brendon's life with the teachers so they would know if he had had a stressful time that maybe they could help work through that too. And likewise they would share that with us you know if he had something great or exciting each day or something that was stressful so that we could help with that at home.”*

Mike Fields, Parent

In serving students with disabilities, it is also important to define and understand the role of the 504 Plan. A 504 Plan is developed to make sure that a child who has a disability identified under the law and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution gets proper accommodations. Those accommodations should allow a student with the disability the same opportunity for access to learning and academic success as students without disabilities.

For students with disabilities who may not require specialized instruction but need the assurance that they will receive equal access to public education and services, a document is created to outline their specific accessibility requirements. Students with 504 Plans do not require specialized instruction, but, like the IEP, a 504 Plan should be updated annually to ensure that the student is receiving the most effective accommodations for his or her specific circumstances.

In addition to the child's parents and you, the educator, this team can include special and general education teachers, speech therapists, occupational therapists, educational aides, school psychologists, and social workers. Also, others may be working with students outside of school: therapists to work on problem behaviors, speech/language therapists to address communication difficulties, and psychiatrists or neurologists to manage medications and medical problems. Experts advise that families of students with autism could also be participating in therapy to support the child, as well as engaging in Applied Behavior Analysis to reinforce skills

at home.

*“There’s a variety of people who are qualified to give the actual diagnosis. In a school system there’s a difference between diagnosis and eligibility, so diagnosis is made by a medical or psychological professional whereas in the school system the child needs to have an eligibility of autism, which means there may be a variety of diagnoses that a child has. So they may have autism, Down syndrome and ADHD, and what you need to look at is which one of those is their primary... causes their primary deficits? And that would be their eligibility in a school system so there’s a little bit of a difference there.”*

Dana T. Zavatkey, Ph.D.

Program Manager, School Consultation Program

Marcus Autism Center, Atlanta

Remember that the structure is designed to help the individual student receive the *best possible* education and support. In that effort – it’s also important to keep the following practical guidelines in mind:

- **Each Student is an Individual**

Thinking of each student as an individual is critical in providing appropriate support and growth. Different children have different needs at different ages. It is important to develop age-appropriate interests, help a child develop as many peer-level behaviors as possible, and achieve as much independence as he or she can.

- **Establish Appropriate Expectations for Outcomes**

Establish appropriate expectations for growth and competence. Building competencies requires patience, setting priorities and establishing small goals to reach the desired outcome. Ensure that the mindset of the team is committed to teaching, as opposed to care giving, and expect to be surprised, impressed and rewarded by all that a student can do.

- **Build from the Appropriate Level**

Meet the student where he or she is. For each of the skill areas that need to be addressed with a student with autism, develop an understanding of the individual’s current ability, and build from that level. This approach applies to social and communication issues as well as academics. Understand where a student is and problem solve what is impeding progress from that point.

- **Understand Motivating Factors**

Motivation is critical to attention and learning. Know what motivates a particular student. Be aware that this may be very different from what motivates a typical child. Use his interests to focus attention to a less interesting or non-preferred activity.

So now you have a roadmap and a basic understanding the IDEA, IEP, 504 Plan, and LRE. How do you put the philosophy and principles within those structures into practice with the classroom? What modifications and accommodations can be put into place?

*“Within a school system, especially in the public school system, they are mandated to meet core curriculum standards or to address grade level curriculum regardless of the child’s level of functioning. That being said, if the child cannot do -- you know cannot read Hamlet which may be in part of the standards that are used in high school language arts class – but they are not there skill-wise, we need to work on pre-requisite skills or how to modify that curriculum to meet their needs but they are still being exposed to that grade level curriculum.”*

Dana T. Zavatkay, Ph.D.

Program Manager, School Consultation Program

Marcus Autism Center, Atlanta

Supports for children with autism can include

- A specially-trained classroom teacher
- Accommodated or alternate assessments
- Adapting curriculum
- Extra staffing support
- Visual supports
- Adaptive equipment or technology
- Related services, such as speech, language, and/or occupational or physical therapy

Just as individualized teaching approaches benefit our general student population, no single method for teaching students with autism is successful for all. Yet experts agree, with early intervention, students with autism can and do succeed in the public school setting.

*“We can make a big difference in how that child’s brain develops, which affects them not only during those years we’re providing treatment, the intensive treatment, but thereafter, they’re going to benefit more from regular school, interactions with peers and that sort of thing.”*

Wayne Fisher, Ph.D.

Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders

Munroe-Meyer Institute, Nebraska

Danny Ahlrich was diagnosed with autism when he was 21 months old. From the age of three, occupational and speech therapy became part of the weekly routine.

*“We started him in an early intervention in the public schools, which was tremendous. I didn’t really know that existed. Here I had a four-year-old who I wouldn’t even put on a bus or take some place, and I was putting my little three-year-old, who at that time didn’t speak, on a school bus every day.”*

Donna Ahlrich, Danny’s Mother

*“The public schools... the early intervention was tremendous. And that tied in with a lot of therapy. He did an afterschool thing with autism that taught social skills. This may sound silly, but it taught him to go ‘my name is Danny. Do you want to play’ It also taught him that if someone is going like this [arms crossed] it means they don’t want you to come up next to him. If they’re smiling, all of these body languages everyone learns intuitively, autistic children don’t learn. And they literally have to be taught. And we had down on paper and we role played. All of these things tied together.*

*“I’m not sure if it was the public schools or the therapy... or all of the things together, but each one helps something else, which made something else work and as a result, by the time he was in first grade, he was able to be mainstreamed.”*

An autism pilot program at a public school in Georgia provided the Ahlrich family with the resources and support they needed.

*“They had a couple of kids, a teacher and a para-pro. There was no self-contained class. These children were mainstreamed from the first minute. And you would have a para-pro in there. His first grade teacher, bless her heart, who had never had an autistic child, this had never been done before, was so, ‘well sure, bring him in. We can do this.’ She was so positive and so willing to do everything. This sounds like a stretch but it’s really not. The principal came and talked to me one day, she noticed that the grades came up with Danny and two other boys who were autistic... [she said] the school’s personality was changing... the other children, when it wasn’t they come in for singing or at recess be nice to them... let’s go sit with them in the lunchroom... these kids were just peers. This is Danny. He likes Pokeman, tricking his sister and doesn’t like homework... and by the way, he’s autistic.”*

Donna Ahlrich, Danny’s Mother

As a middle school student, Danny’s mom says the academics – and homework – are more challenging. Yet she says he is doing the work and tests like his classmates.

*“Middle school homework is so much harder than elementary school. Dan’s academics... what takes the child next to him 30 minutes to learn, it will take him two hours at night. In his mind, middle school... all it’s been is homework. That said, he is doing the work and tests of the child next to him.”*

Donna Ahlrich, Danny’s Mother

*“I get B’s and C’s on my progress and A’s on my progress reports.”*

Danny Ahlrich

Creative activity, thinking, writing, problem solving, participating in project-based and experiential kinds of learning. For all students, education is part of the lifelong process of being engaged and finding meaning.

*“So what teachers can do to help students who are having trouble with communicating is help them focus on meaning and intention. What has meaning for that student? Because that’s what’s going to motivate them to communicate and be purposeful. For example we have a student who, a couple of students who are fanatics about World War II and as a result we built a lot of their learning around issues related to World War II. And what you, and I think we all know as adults, is when we are talking about and thinking about the stuff that we like, we are more communicative, we are more purposeful, we are more intentional, all of our systems function better.”*

David Nelson, Executive Director, The Community School

In terms of classroom management, there are strategies for organizing your classroom to help make students with autism more comfortable while meeting the needs of your other students.

If the concern is **difficulty with transitions**, consider creating a **daily schedule**, a **visual agenda**, or **designated seats**.

If the concern is **problematic behavior**, try creating a **“break area”** or home base to escape classroom stimulation.

If the concern is **distraction**, seat the student with autism in a **low traffic area** of the classroom, **away from toys** or books or **face desks away** from windows and doors.

If the concern is **sensitivity to touch, smells or sounds**, **avoid touching** the student initially, **avoid perfumes** or heavy lotions, **use a soft voice** when possible, use **carpeting** or **provide earplugs or headphones** when possible.

If the concern is **sensitivity to light**, particularly fluorescent lights, use bulbs that do not flicker, **turn off overhead** lights or **use lower levels of light**, or allow a student to wear a baseball cap.

To review additional methods for reaching students with autism, you can download the accompanying handout. And remember that learning strategies that classroom teachers employ to reach higher-functioning students with autism can benefit all learners.

*“Almost everything that we would tell them to use with a student with autism would benefit any of the kids in the classroom. It may be a little more support than they really need, but one of the strategies we teach children with higher functioning autism to use in the general education classroom is making a to-do-list to break down tasks into smaller tasks and that happens with the other kids. We just may not have to teach it as specifically as we teach it with the student with autism – for a typical child or their typical peers may already be doing that skill and may learn that from watching their parent whereas the student with autism may not just learn that from watching someone else do it. But the supports that we give them and structured teaching works for all kids.”*

Dana T. Zavatkay, Ph.D.  
Program Manager, School Consultation Program  
Marcus Autism Center, Atlanta

And like all students, those struggling with autism need perhaps an extra dose of our patience and understanding.

*“Students are doing the best that they can. They are trying to understand, they are trying to be successful, they are trying to connect. And the fact that somebody is acting in difficult ways or is not communicating clearly...it’s safest and best to make the assumption that it’s because they are confused. They don’t understand that they can’t do what they are being asked. So and with some kids in particular it’s kind of hard to hold onto that because if the kid is really being difficult or being rude or angry or you know has a real problem with kind of anger or expressions of anger, then it’s going to be hard for a teacher not to get either personally offended or into a command and control mode. But I think it’s really important for people to remember that students are doing the best that they can, given the ways of processing information that they have.”*

David Nelson  
Executive Director, The Community School

So in this segment on autism, we’ve touched upon eligibility requirements, developing goals for your students with autism spectrum disorder, and strategies for classroom management, teaching and accommodations. In the next and final segment, we will look at some special considerations, including support from your entire school community, transitional considerations for teens with autism, and to address those life skills for success beyond the school years.